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C O N F I D E N T I A L KINSHASA 000214

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SUBJECT: VP BEMBA WANTS TO DISTANCE MLC FROM TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT

Classified By: Poloff Edward Bestic for Reasons 1.4 B and D

1. (C) SUMMARY: Vice President Bemba wants to distance his party from the transitional government, according to a senior official in Bemba's party, the MLC. The official said Bemba is trying to reach out to Etienne Tshisekedi's opposition party, the UDPS. END SUMMARY.

Bemba Envisions Difficult Balancing Act

2. (C) Congo Liberation Movement (MLC) executive secretary Thomas Luhaka told Emboffs February 4 that MLC leader Jean-Pierre Bemba wants to distance his party as much as possible from the transitional government, because there is increasing public ire against the regime. Luhaka asked rhetorically how the MLC could do this since it is part of the transitional government. (Note: Bemba is a vice president and there are several MLC ministers in the GDRC. End Note.) He commented half-jokingly that many figures in office keep a low profile and would pass unrecognized by an angry public, unlike Luhaka himself, who appears regularly as Bemba's spokesman.

Reaching out to the UDPS

3. (C) Luhaka confirmed that Bemba had asked him to establish contact with the opposition Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS) party led by Etienne Tshisekedi, but noted that both Bemba and Tshisekedi have large egos, making any alliance between the two difficult at best. In Luhaka's opinion, one of the UDPS' main strengths is its closeness to influential members of the local media who hail from the same region--the Kasais--that Tshisekedi does. For example, the leaders of several top Kinshasa newspapers including "Le Potentiel," "Le Phare," and "La Tempete des Tropiques" are UDPS sympathizers and ensure that their papers reflect UDPS views. (Comment: This is true. "Le Phare" and "La Tempete" are basically in-house organs, whereas "Le Potentiel" is considered less biased. End Comment.)

Keep an Eye on the Military

4. (C) Asked what potential dangers he saw on the horizon, Luhaka admitted that he is focused more on managing day-to-day crises, but said it was important to watch potential frustration among the military rank and file. For example, there is an ongoing dispute between Defense Minister Adolphe Onusumba (RCD-Goma) and military chief of staff Lt. Gen. Kisempia over salaries. According to Luhaka, Kisempia says there are 58,000 soldiers in and around Kinshasa, all of whom are awaiting salaries, whereas by Onusumba's count there are only 28,000. Luhaka said Onusumba commented to him that the Rwandans considered military funding and figures sacrosanct, whereas Kisempia as an ex-Zairean Armed Forces (FAZ) officer apparently retained the bad habits of that organization.

COMMENT

5. (C) Distancing the MLC from the transitional government will be a difficult feat. It is a significant departure from Bemba's initial strategy for the transition, which was to portray the MLC as the only serious, competent group in the transitional government. END COMMENT.

6. (U) Bujumbura minimize considered.
MEECE